MODERNIST ICONOCLASM AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS IN T. S. ELIOT'S *ASH WEDNESDAY* AND ÂSAF HÂLET ÇELEBİ'S *İBRAHİM (ABRAHAM)*

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to undertake a comparative analysis of two modernist poems, T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* and Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi's *İbrahim (Abraham)*, to explore how the tension of spiritual crisis is treated in two seminal works that present the tensions of ethical, moral and religious consciousness in the modern era. Problematizing the internal and external idols that metaphorically stand for knowledge, desire and any worldly illusions, both poems engage with the same concerns but they employ remarkably distinct cultural and theological perspectives. Reflecting Eliot's penitential conversion to Anglo-Catholicism and Çelebi's Sufi-inspired surrealism, both poems seemingly adopt a critical attitude towards worldly illusions and foreground the self's detachment from them by destroying both external and internal idols. Eliot's poem presents disciplined self-restraint, highlighted by the line "*Because I do not hope to turn again*," revealing the poet's conscious, restrictive attitude towards the pre-penitential conversion, which consolidates his desire for spiritual renewal and affirms his idealization of renunciation. Çelebi's *İbrahim*, by contrast, posits the biblical iconoclast and adopts an interrogative approach while criticizing what is idolized. Both the ethical and psychological tension is evident through the repeated question "who" in the lines "Who is placing new idols," "Who is bringing sun to my home," and "Who is breaking my heart." Through a comparative reading, this study elucidates how spiritual crisis, ethical responsibility, and the limits of human agency are negotiated in modernist poetry, thus offering complementary insights into the cross-cultural demonstration of modernist spiritual anxiety. The poems differ in their treatment of knowledge, moral action, and redemption, as is evident in Eliot's embodiment of the renunciation and emphasis on obedience and discipline, whereas Çelebi adopts an interrogative voice seeking to identify the agent while questioning the ethical ramifications of iconoclastic action. By juxtaposing different literatures, this analysis presents how modernist poetic form engages with the ethical and spiritual concerns of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Modernist Poetry, Iconoclasm, Spiritual Crisis

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, T. S. Eliot'a ait *Ash Wednesday* ve Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi'ye ait *İbrahim* başlıklı iki modernist şiiri karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz ederek, modern çağda etik, ahlaki ve dini bilincin gerilimlerini ele alan bu iki önemli eserde manevi krizin nasıl işlendiğini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bilgi, arzu ve dünyevi illüzyonları metaforik olarak temsil eden içsel ve dışsal putları sorun haline getiren her iki şiir de aynı konuları ele almaktadır, ancak oldukça farklı kültürel ve teolojik perspektifler kullanmaktadır. Eliot'un Anglo-Katolikliğe tövbeyle dönüşünü ve Çelebi'nin Sufi'den esinlenen sürrealizmini yansıtan her iki şiir de, dünyevi illüzyonlara karşı eleştirel bir tutum benimsiyor ve hem içsel hem de dışsal putları yok ederek benliğin bunlardan kopuşunu ön plana çıkarıyor. Eliot'un şiiri, "Çünkü bir daha dönmeyi ummuyorum" dizesiyle vurgulanan disiplinli bir özdenetim sergiler ve şairin tövbe öncesi dönüşümüne karşı bilinçli, kısıtlayıcı tutumunu ortaya koyar; bu tutum, şairin manevi yenilenme arzusunu pekiştirir ve feragat etme idealini onaylar. Buna karşılık, Çelebi'nin *İbrahim*'i, İncil'deki ikonoklastı öne çıkarır ve putlaştırılanı eleştirirken sorgulayıcı bir yaklaşım benimser. Hem etik hem de psikolojik gerilim, "Kırılan putların yerine yenilerini

koyan kim", "Güneşi evime sokan kim" ve "Gönlümü put sanıp da kıran kim" dizelerinde tekrarlanan "kim" sorusu aracılığıyla açıkça ortaya çıkmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı bir okuma yoluyla bu çalışma, modernist şiirde manevi kriz, etik sorumluluk ve insan iradesinin sınırlarının nasıl müzakere edildiğini ortaya koyarak, modernist manevi kaygının kültürler arası tezahürüne tamamlayıcı bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır. Eliot'un vazgeçişi somutlaştırması ve itaat ve disiplini vurgulaması, Çelebi'nin ise ikonoklastik eylemin etik sonuçlarını sorgularken faili tanımlamaya çalışan sorgulayıcı bir ses benimsemesi, ikisinin bilgi, ahlaki eylem ve kurtuluş konusundaki yaklaşımlarının farklı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Farklı edebiyatları karşılaştırarak, bu analiz modernist şiir biçiminin çağdaş dünyanın etik ve manevi kaygılarıyla nasıl ilgilendiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernist Şiir, İkonoklazm, Manevi Kriz

INTRODUCTION

Marking a departure from the previous century, the first half of the twentieth century underwent a revolution within English poetry, by generating poets who operated as explorers of experience across a wide spectrum and are capable of using language in a more intricate, allusive and intellectually demanding way (Mathur, 2024: 322). By the end of the nineteenth century, the critique of realism, rhetoric, and the utilitarian characteristic of thought nourished by mass culture began to form a self-conscious literary movement. Poets and critics now favoured a language that could express inner states and moments of intensity. In alignment with this, symbolism emerged as a philosophical challenge against inherited poetic norms, defying the descriptive aims of realism as well as the persuasive structures employed through Victorian eloquence as elucidated by Bush (2005) in "Modernist Poetry and Poetics," drawing on Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899):

> "… it was Pater's admirer, Arthur Symons, who in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) put Mallarmé's assertion that 'poetry is the language ´ of a state of crisis' on the lips of every aspiring poet and inspired the next generation to pursue a 'revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition'. In an emblematic recollection that would mark the coming century's definitive break with Victorian poetics, Symons even gave the new century its rallying cry: 'Take eloquence and wring its neck!' said Verlaine in his *Art Poétique´*; and he showed, by writing it, that French verse could be written without rhetoric.' Verlaine's poems, Symons adds, 'can only be compared, in modern poetry, with a poem for which Verlaine had a great admiration, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Only, with Verlaine, the thing itself, the affection or the regret, is everything; there is no room for meditation over destiny, or search for a problematical consolation" (235).

Identified as "a poet of ideas" by Williams (2001: 302), Mallarmé's description of poetry highlights that it is instrumental in articulating "a state of crisis" and this manifests in both Eliot's and Çelebi's poetry. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot (1919) notes that what makes a poet distinctive is not the intensity or uniqueness of their personal feelings, and underscores that the poet's task is to transform ordinary emotions through poetic forms to articulate feelings that do not exist as actual emotions (72-73). Accordingly, the two poets examined in this study demonstrate considerable skill in using poetic forms and can be construed as iconoclasts through their poetic voices.

Prior to the elaboration on the poems, an examination of the concept of iconoclasm can elucidate the tension of the spiritual crisis. As a practice, iconoclasm draws on the idea that "every figure, especially every human figure, or every figure made by human hands, is unseemly and blasphemous" (Besançon, 2000: 20). Plato is a philosophical precursor of iconoclasm (36). The term is traditionally linked to both the Byzantine Empire and the Reformation (Kolrud and Prusac, 2014: 5). As Jones-Frank asserts, the church itself operates as an icon standing for a spiritual community that comes together in ritual, revealing presence

rather than offering a narrative illustration (1994:7-10). Iconography, hence, operates as a site where belief, community and any relevant terms are made manifest.

With the advent of modernity, symbolic systems are exposed to suspicion, giving rise to iconoclasm operating as both an ethical and aesthetic response. Iconoclasm entails the dismantling of images and structures perceived as false, oppressive, or spiritually empty. As Kersten's discussion of Darrow illustrates, iconoclasm often involves moral tension, since the act of breaking dominant forms may require ethical compromise and the abandonment of established loyalties (2011: xi). Similarly, Brand's analysis of Emily Pfeiffer demonstrates that modern poetic practice frequently oscillates between icon-making and icon-breaking, revealing the paradoxical impulse to create images only to dismantle them within the same work (2015: 9). In this sense, iconoclasm does not negate meaning but exposes the instability and fragility of symbolic mediation.

As denoted by Berger (1999: 33) the "inner self," called differently in accordance with various traditions such as "higher self," "divine spark," "inner Buddha," "inner child" or simply the soul (as cited in *New Religious Movements and the Romantic Spirit of Modernity* by Aupers, Houtman, and Watts, 2025: 21) is deemed to be the way to salvation, that is why, the destruction of both internal and external idols is emphasized through poetic voices as exemplified in this study. Accordingly, this study employs a comparative literary analysis method through a close reading of the selected poems in order to examine how T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* and Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi's *İbrahim (Abraham)* articulate spiritual crisis and ethical tension within modernist poetry from different cultural and theological perspectives. By analyzing the shared motif of idol destruction and the poets' divergent approaches to renunciation, moral agency, and spiritual renewal, the study highlights how modernist form engages with the ethical and spiritual anxieties of the modern era.

ICONOCLASM AND RENEWAL in T. S. ELIOT'S *ASH WEDNESDAY*

Rooted in Western Christianity, "Ash Wednesday" refers to the first day of Lent, taking place "six and a half weeks before Easter," and stands for "human mortality and the need for reconciliation with God and marks the beginning of the penitential Lenten season." It dates back to the early period when the ritual of imposing ashes symbolized repentance, humility and the renunciation of any worldly attachments:

> "It was the practice in Rome for penitents and grievous sinners to begin their period of public penance on the first day of Lent in preparation for their restoration to the sacrament of the Eucharist. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. When these practices fell into disuse (8th–10th century), the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was symbolized by placing ashes on the heads of the entire congregation. Today, in the Roman Catholic Church, the ashes are applied in the shape of a cross on the forehead of each worshipper on Ash Wednesday. These ashes are obtained by burning the palms used in the previous year's Palm Sunday service. Receiving ashes is not one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church; therefore, anyone who wishes to receive ashes may do so, regardless of age, religion, or personal standing in the church. The ashes serve as a memento mori and are often accompanied with some variation of the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Ash Wednesday*, 2025).

As can be deduced from the title *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot's poem traces penitential practices even if it is not necessary to assume personal or biographical content. The "I" is not necessarily deemed as the poet employing his own voice yet it is obvious that the experience of "I" aligns with or relates to the experience of the author. The poem, itself, appears to be a "self-sufficient" and "self-explaining creation" and within Eliot's case, it is not of great

importance to seek who is the man personally unveiling himself through the lines (Traversi, 1976: 58). In the poem, Eliot draws on biblical allusions along with passages that reflect Anglo-Catholic liturgy and it is obvious that he was inspired by his reading of *Dante* in much of the symbolism and imagery. These elements are subordinated to a narrative revolving around spiritual aridity and isolation. Despite the tone of religious verse, the poem articulates neither clear faith nor settled conviction. What comes to the forefront is "the instinct for belief" rather than religious sensibility (Ackroyd, 1984: 164-165).

One characteristic of Eliot's major poetry is its sense of continuity, which the poem exemplifies. Featuring a religious dimension in its sensibility while reflecting contemporary concerns, it is thoroughly personal and liberated from sentimental intensity. What is thematized is elaborated on by Traversi (1976) as follows:

> "an acceptance of conversion as a necessary and irretrievable act of decision following from man's distinctive privilege, and obligation, of choice: an act which brings with it dangers and difficulties of its own, which may even turn out to be a false path or a deception, but the necessity of which needs to be acknowledged, in a spirit of recognized risk, if life is to have meaning at all. The answer to the question posed nearly twenty years earlier by Prufrock in his monologue — "Do I dare disturb the universe?"—clearly lies in the poet's use of the opening phrase of Guido Cavalcanti's halletetta *Perc' io non spero di tornar giammai* transcribed as 'Because I do not hope to turn again' (58).

Modernist iconoclasm does not intend to destroy only religious icons but also any false forms including individual ambition, progress and striving and similar pursuits that Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* portrays as a space not worth returning, in fact, the poem emphasizes a refusal to 'turn' again as exemplified in the lines:

> Because I do not hope to turn again
>
> Because I do not hope
>
> Because I do not hope to turn
>
> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
>
> I no longer strive to strive towards such things
>
> (Why should the aged egale stretch its wings?)
>
> Why should I mourn
>
> The vanished power of the usual reign? (Eliot, 1930: 109).

The repeated negations, embodying a disillusionment with conventional faith and human desire for certainty, mark a resolution and a stable stance rejecting turning. What the poet seeks is a radical breaking from the old despite the expression "I hope" implies vulnerability to some extent. This reflects that the poet desires a sort of spiritual discipline, rejecting superficiality that can represent any external elements and worldly desires. Rather than focusing on symbols or rituals, Eliot underscores inner transformation, which can be interpreted as an embodiment of modern iconoclasm. This involves the psychological and spiritual dismantling of old religious imagery, as seen in the following lines:

> "Teach us to care and not to care
>
> Teach us to sit still" (Eliot, 1930: 110).

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The struggle with spiritual inadequacy, and the failure of traditional spiritual aspirations symbolized by the wings, is evident in these lines, consolidating the poet's iconoclastic desire:

> Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
>
> But merely vans to beat the air
>
> The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
>
> Smaller and dryer than the will (Eliot, 1930: 110).

Ash Wednesday exemplifies modernist iconoclasm which manifests as a process of both spiritual and ethical renewal. In order to explore the inner struggle of faith, the poem challenges conventional religious observances. This defiance foregrounds the failure of old aspirations and also the insufficiency of worldly desires. The repetitive use of negations and a conscious refusal to "turn" back indicate both a deliberate renunciation of the old and a radical break from the past, underscoring the cultivation of spiritual discipline over external rituals that resonate with idolatry. The poem affirms the possibility of renewal and hope as can be inferred from the lines below:

> For what is done, not to be done again
>
> May the judgement not be too heavy upon us (Eliot, 1930: 110).

while portraying spiritual inadequacy and embodies modernist poetry through a voice of interrogation and critique, seeking the reconstitution of belief. Eliot offers seclusion and emphasizes the significance of listening to inner voice, as seen in this line "No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice" (Eliot, 1930: 118), thereby extoling these through expressive language.

UNMAKING THE SACRED IMAGE: ICONOCLASM IN "İBRAHİM (ABRAHAM)"

One of the prominent representatives of "cultural poetry" in Turkish literature (Aydın, 2023: 93), Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi's poetry incorporates cultural, historical, mystical and philosophical elements and thoughts into the lines. In the 1940s, he sought to form a new kind of poetry based on world culture (Çetin, 2021: 240). He integrates a range of sources including the elements of the East such as mythology, Indian culture, Buddhism, along with Sufism. His poems revolve around these elements and he enriches his poetry through the repetition of words in order to create a mysterious atmosphere via expressions from fairy tales, religions and imagination (Aydın, 2023: 93).

Sufism is not becoming attached to anything owned by created beings but only to the Absolute Truth. Becoming a sea within a drop of love, Sufism requires annihilation that manifests in forgetting the self. For the one who can achieve this, everything in the world vanishes and only the Beloved exists. This is fundamental to Sufism. Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi's view of Sufism cannot be reduced merely to worship or ritual remembrance since he refers to Sufism principally as a cultural phenomenon and he employs it as a background that strengthens his poetry. Through juxtaposition of being and non-being, he prefers to use Sufism allegorically, thereby deepening this phenomenon in the process. Each element contributes to Çelebi's poetry as concepts that consolidate the Absolute Truth (Ulutaş, 2008: 493). His exploration of the secret of whirling that can permeate every being through Sema-i semavi exemplifies this (Schimmel, 2001: 16). An individual can undergo an experience of pure sensation in the aftermath of a particular state of mind and yielding to it, at times, without any intentional descent into the subconscious. This mode of sensing one's place within a larger totality is comparable to the spiritual state of the Sufi mystic: it is as if all

beings in the universe are encapsulated within the self or the self exists in every being. It is debatable whether Çelebi adopted the unity of being but what is clear is that he was inspired by a mystical illumination rooted in the East (Narlı, 2006: 185).

In line with the concept of self composed of every being in the universe and the self present in every being, the idols seem to be portrayed as if they are composed of every existence concerned with the materialistic world or worldly entities, therefore, an interrogative and imperative voice gives an order in Çelebi's *Abraham*. His choice of the name can be linked to the function of a prophet as an iconoclast: "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions" (Heschel, 1969:10). Without knowledge of the narrative of Prophet Abraham's destruction of the idols in the Kaaba, Çelebi's "İbrahim" cannot be fully apprehended (Uçman, 2023: 256). The poem's critique of contemporary life and spiritual transformation resonates with broader interpretations, as discussed in various sources like *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America* which traces how this observant Jew turned into a "spiritual radical" who "judged contemporary life from the uncompromising viewpoint of a Hebrew prophet" (Kaplan, 2007: x). The prophet is viewed as a figure of superior intellect and hence, the reason why Abraham is chosen as can be elucidated on:

> "The prophet knew that religion could distort what the Lord demanded of man, that priests themselves had committed perjury by bearing false witness, condoning violence, tolerating hatred, calling for ceremonies instead of bursting forth with wrath and indignation at cruelty, deceit, idolatry, and violence" (Heschel,1969: 11).

Abraham

Take idols inside me down

With the axe in your hands

Who is placing new ones

In place of the destroyed others again (1993:10).

What Çelebi prioritizes is the inner world as is evident in the lines above.

"When Abraham broke his father's idols, he also broke with something larger: everything that his society and culture thought was "real" and holy. That act of breaking gave birth to the prophetic temperament" (Salkin, 2013: xii).

As previously noted, Çelebi makes use of certain words and phrases rooted in Buddhism, Christianity and Islamic Sufism to create and nourish harmony in his poetry, yet what he prioritizes is the inner meanings as well as religious and mystical aspects rather than the outward appearance of letters, aiming to transcend superficiality (Çetin, 2021: 237).

Âsaf Hâlet cannot be strictly categorized as a Buddhist, a Sufi or a mystic so his personal life does not bear marks of these traditions. The reason why he resorts to these as the subjects was his critique of positivism and rigid materialist attitudes that prevailed in society, culture, art and science during the Republican period. Since he noticed the lack of spiritual aspects and their secondary rank to the positivism, he felt the need to ground himself in spiritual values along with historical and cultural heritage without ignoring inner, spiritual and metaphysical aspects of human beings. Transcending the confinements of reason, science and experience, he foregrounds what cannot be reduced to the experimental and rational domain, for this reason, he employs the cultural elements of the East in his poetry. He highlights the spiritiual and metaphysical aspects of humanity (Çetin, 2021: 239). Making reference to the historical

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idolatry can be traced in his allusions to Nebuchadnezzar and symbols like the Hanging Gardens:

> Beauties walking around Hanging Gardens
>
> Made idols by Nebuchadnezzar
>
> I who embrace timeless gardens
>
> With whom the beauties have stayed
>
> Abraham
>
> Who is breaking my heart
>
> By assuming an idol (Çelebi, 1993: 10).

Despite his effort to destroy the idols, new ones are constructed (Arpa, 2021: 1252) as is evident in the lines below:

> Who is placing new ones
>
> In place of the destroyed others again (10).

This can be construed as a characteristic of modernism that keeps generating idols ceaselessly. The last lines of the poem posit an accusation which reflects the double-edged of modernist iconoclasm and may be interpreted as the wrong treatment of the heart as an entity linked to the spiritual dimension in accordance with materialism dominant in modernism, thus foregrounding a perpetual crisis that appears in the form of new false gods.

CONCLUSION

Considering their treatment of modernist spirituality as a condition of crisis, both T. S. Eliot and Âsaf Hâlet Çelebi appear to shape this crisis through relentless iconoclasm; therefore, both poems can be construed as a response to both iconoclasm and spiritual void, yet they adopt markedly different approaches. Foregrounding an endless destruction of idols, Çelebi's poetry destabilizes even God and prophetic figure, Abraham, by raising questions which render the sacred as a perpetual question as can be traced in the interrogative voice. On the other hand, Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* emphasizes the management of this crisis through discipline, renunciation, silence and prayer. Unlike Çelebi's fractured representation, God symbolizes a negative and unreachable existence. Eliot differs from Çelebi in that he offers a disciplined and penitential modernism whereas Çelebi presents a radical and restless modernism. Consequently, the two poets frame "modernism" not as a denial of faith but as a transformative process through which belief turns into sustained certainty and spiritual meaning endures merely in pursuit of doubt and self-negation. What differentiates is that Eliot seeks spiritual resolution through inward discipline and obedience rather than rebellion whereas Çelebi persistently questions, thus exposing iconoclasm as a timeless ethical demand within modernity. Representing different cultural contexts, the comparative reading of the selected poems demonstrates the negotiation of spiritual crisis within modernist poetry across cultures and affirms the transformation of iconoclasm as a poetic strategy.

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